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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000895

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: U.S. ORTHODOX LEADERS DISCUSS HALKI, PATRIARCHATE
WITH GOT

Classified by Ambassador; reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: An eight-member delegation of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a New York-based Greek Orthodox group, met with three GOT ministers in Ankara and discussed the continued closure of the Halki Seminary and other problems confronting the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Archons and the Ambassador asserted that the Patriarchate will not survive in Turkey unless the problems are resolved. The Ministers said the GOT is seeking ways within Turkish law to open Halki and loosen other restrictions. They said it would be easier for the GOT to improve relations with the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey if Greek authorities would loosen restrictions on the Turkish minority in Thrace. The MFA tried to prevent Embassy from arranging Cabinet-level meetings for the Archons. End Summary.

Archons Hold Meetings, Luncheon

12. (U) After spending three days in Istanbul, the Archons met in Ankara February 9 with Education Minister Celik, Interior Minister Aksu, and State Minister Aydin. They also held a luncheon in honor of the Ambassador, attended by Turkish parliamentarians, scholars, journalists, and NGO representatives. They received a plaque from an organization representing the spouses of police officers killed in the line of duty, in recognition of their USD 3,000 donation.

Survival of Patriarchate at Stake

13. (U) Anthony Limberakis, leader of the Archon delegation, told each of the ministers that the Archons are concerned about three issues: 1) The continued closure of the Halki seminary (the GOT shut down the seminary, on Heybeli Island in the Sea of Marmara, in 1971 when it nationalized all private institutions of higher learning); 2) restrictions on the right of the Patriarchate to acquire and own property; and 3) GOT interference in the Patriarchal succession process (the GOT requires that the Patriarch be a Turkish citizen). The Ambassador, who participated in the meetings, said the survival of the Patriarchate in Istanbul is ultimately at stake. Turkey's Greek Orthodox community has dwindled to about 2,500. Under current conditions, the Patriarchate might have to be relocated in the near future, perhaps to Moscow. This would not be in the interests of the U.S. or Turkey. A number of U.S. senators and congressmen are concerned about this possibility.

Options for Reopening Halki Discussed

14. (U) The ministers all expressed support for the survival of the Patriarchate in Istanbul and the eventual reopening of Halki. They said they are optimistic that the GOT and the Patriarchate will develop a more positive relationship. Aydin averred that the Patriarchate is a long-standing, historic Turkish institution that must be preserved. Celik noted that Halki operated under Ottoman sultans, and said it was "unacceptable" that a modern, secular government is keeping it closed. He said an ad hoc Education Ministry committee formed under his direction recently completed a study on how Halki could be reopened. According to the study, the seminary could be reopened, 1) as a secondary school attached to the Education Ministry, like a number of existing Greek high schools; 2) as a faculty of a Turkish University; or 3) as a two-year high school attached to a foundation. The study is being reviewed by other branches of the GOT. These ideas are opposed by some elements of the Turkish State. If

the study wins broad support, the options will be presented to the Patriarchate. However, if the Patriarchate continues to insist on having sole authority over Halki, it will be difficult to reopen the seminary. Turkish law requires that all schools, public or private, be under Education Ministry authority. If the GOT makes an exception for Halki, than all the Islamic groups will want independent high schools as well.

GOT: Thracian Turks Also Face Problems

15. (U) Each of the ministers indicated that it would be politically easier for the GOT to loosen restrictions on the Patriarchate if the Greek government and Orthodox Church would do the same for the Turkish minority in Greece. They claimed Greece has not opened the mosque in Athens, and Turkish Muslims in Greek Thrace are not allowed to elect their mufti. Reverend Karloutsos, assistant to U.S. Archbishop Demetrios, said the Archons met with the Archbishop of Athens in November and urged him to support greater religious freedom for the Turkish community in Greece. However, Karloutsos argued, the two issues should not be linked directly -- the Greek Orthodox in Istanbul are Turkish citizens and their rights should not depend on the status of Turks in Greece.

Comment - MFA Tries to Block Meetings

16. (C) Embassy had to work around the MFA to arrange Cabinet-level meetings for the Archons. The MFA responded to our official request for meetings with FM Gul and other ministers by saying they were unavailable, and instead offering the acting director of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. We arranged the Celik, Aksu, and Aydin meetings at the last minute through unofficial channels. An MFA official attended the Aksu meeting, occasionally interjecting unhelpful comments into the conversation. At one point, he told the Archons that the Turkish minority in Greece has "real problems," compared to the "minor" problems facing the Patriarchate in Istanbul. Last year, the Archons' only Ankara meeting was with MFA Deputy U/S Ilkin; the Archons told us they did not want to meet with Ilkin again this year because he "humiliated" them last time.

EDELMAN